

The Russian Revolution .

Russia is a huge land of flat plains, pine forests and long, wide rivers. In 1917 after a series of revolutions, it became the first country in the world to form a Communist government. This was a key event in 20th-century world history. Why did it happen?

The revolutions of 1917 had many causes. Some were short term and had arisen quite recently, whereas others were long term and had been brewing up for many years.

THE LONG-TERM CAUSES OF THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION .

Peasants .

The peasants were freed in 1861 and given small amounts of land for which they had to pay the government back. They therefore had small farms and heavy debts, with the result that they were very poor. Most of the peasants could not read or write, so they knew very little about how to improve the land. They still used the old farming methods, working on their plots by hand. They envied the rich with their huge estates.

In Russia, a small number of upper-class people held most of the wealth and power. They had large town houses and vast country estates. The Russian Orthodox Church was also rich and powerful.

Workers.

During the 1890s, industry began to develop in Russia. Huge iron foundries, textile factories and engineering works were set up. Many were owned by the government or by foreigners. Most were in the big cities such as Moscow and St Petersburg. Peasants moved to the cities to get jobs in the factories. Some just came in the winter when it was impossible to work the land. Some came to stay. By 1900, 20% of the Russian people were workers living in cities.

Factories in Russia were very large, half of them employing more than 1,000 people. The factory workers had problems of their own.

Wages are being reduced. Rent allowances and bonuses are being taken away. Hours of work are being extended. Workers who make trouble are being blacklisted. The system of fines and beating up is in full swing.

Report by Joseph Stalin .

The Tsar .

The ruler of Russia was called the Tsar. He made all decisions himself. He could ask for advice, but did not have to take it. There was a secret police force which spied on everyone.

Anyone who spoke out the government could be shot , or sent to Siberia. Books and newspapers were censored. Sometimes the Tsar's secret police stirred people up to blame all their troubles on Jews, who were then attacked. The position of the Tsar was also supported by the Church. The priests in every town and village taught that he was the 'Little Father' of all the Russian people and must be obeyed.

Nicholas II became Tsar of Russia in 1894. The picture below shows him with his wife Alexandra, their daughters, and their only son, Alexis.

Is it possible, do you think, to tell what people's characters are like from looking at their faces? Nicholas, in fact, was weak-willed and hated making decisions. He was, however, devoted to his wife and family. His son and heir had a terrible disease called haemophilia, which means that his blood would not clot. Any bump caused agonising internal bleeding, and a bruise or cut could cause death. Alexandra was naturally always worried about her son, and Nicholas tried to comfort her. In this situation, how difficult do you think it would be for Nicholas to be a successful tsar?

The long-term causes of the Revolution were therefore:

An undemocratic government which was neither fair nor very good.
The bad working and living conditions for the workers in towns.

The extreme poverty of the peasants and their need for more land.

The opposition.

Some people, of course, were against this system. They were split between the reformers and a smaller group of revolutionaries. The reformers, or Liberals, wanted to modernise Russia gradually. They admired the parliamentary systems of Britain, France and the USA. They wanted free elections, more education for the people and no censorship.

The revolutionaries, on the other hand, wanted to throw out the whole tsarist system and build a different one. One group of revolutionaries were Marxists – that is, they believed in the ideas of Karl Marx, a nineteenth-century German writer who had once lived in London. Marx said:

1. All history is about struggles between different classes: for example, the middle class against the nobles, or the workers against the bosses.
2. The system in Europe is unfair because the factory owner (capitalist) makes a profit out of the workers (proletariat) who actually do the work.
3. In the end, there will be a violent revolution when the workers throw out the bosses and take over the country. The workers will then run the country for the benefit of all.

BOLSHEVIKS.

The Marxist revolutionaries could not say these things in Russia, of course. The Tsar's secret police would arrest them and send them to Siberia. Therefore the revolutionaries lived in exile in Western Europe. They quarrelled among themselves, but the most dedicated of the Marxist revolutionaries were the Bolsheviks, led by Vladimir Lenin. Although there were not many of them, Lenin made the Bolsheviks into a well-organised group. Their newspaper *Iskra* ('The Spark') was smuggled into Russia. Lenin planned for the day when his chance would come to spark off a real revolution.

THE DUMA.

No one took much notice of a few hundred Bolsheviks, however. The Liberals were much more popular, especially among educated Russians. They had even made a tiny gain: there was, from 1906, a Russian parliament called the Duma. This had been granted by the Tsar in the following way. From 1904 to 1905, Russia had fought a war

against Japan. The Russians expected to win easily but in fact lost heavily. This defeat caused strikes and demonstrations in the Russian cities. For a few days in 1905, the Tsar nearly lost control of his country. He offered to call a Duma with free elections. Some of his opponents accepted this, and the protests died down. The Tsar then used his soldiers to crush the rest of his opponents.

When the Duma met, it began to criticise the Tsar and demand more changes. Nicholas was not used to being criticised and did not like it. The Duma was dismissed, and elections for the next one were controlled by the Tsar. Soon the Duma faded into the background: if it tried to do anything against the wishes of the Tsar, he dismissed it.

Two facts became clear: first, no revolution would take place as long as the army stayed loyal to the Tsar; and second, the Tsar could not be trusted. As for the Duma, it hardly counted for anything: it was a gun without bullets.

THE SHORT-TERM CAUSES OF THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION.

The First World War brought revolution nearer. The Tsar's rule was bad enough in peacetime, but a large-scale war showed just how inefficient it was.

The war went badly. An early advance into Germany in 1914 had been halted by two major defeats at the battles of Tannenberg and the Masurian Lakes.

Several nobles were so worried about the results of Rasputin's influence over Nicholas and Alexandra that he was murdered in 1916.

Inflation and unrest.

All over Russia, things were going badly wrong by 1917. The peasants were angry because the army took away the young men and the best horses, making farmwork difficult. Prices, especially food prices, rose, and hunger was widespread. Workers in the cities could not afford high food prices, for wages had not risen nearly so fast. If they tried to strike for better wages, they were accused of being disloyal. For this they could be sent to Siberia for as long as twenty-five years. Soldiers coming home from the war told of defeat, bad generals, no guns, no boots and no medical supplies.

In the cities, soldiers were ordered to stop strikes and demonstrations. This was bitterly resented. Many soldiers had been peasants and workers themselves before the war started. Why should they fire at fellow-Russians when they had joined up to fight Germany? .

THE REVOLUTIONS OF 1917.

In March 1917 a revolution took place in Russia which put an end to the Tsar's rule in Russia for good. It was the first of the two revolutions in Russia that year. Demonstrations and bread riots broke out in Petrograd (formerly called St Petersburg) and other cities and reached a peak in March.

In Petrograd, the rioters were joined by factory workers on strike. When the soldiers were asked to fire on the rioters, they refused, and joined in the strike.

It was now clear that the Tsar could no longer rely on the obedience of his troops. He saw that he had lost control and abdicated on 17 March. This left Russia without an effective ruler. The Duma formed a Provisional Government led by Alexander Kerensky.

The Provisional Government promised to hold elections soon and also promised to divide up the land among the peasants more fairly. But Kerensky felt he had to stick by the alliances Russia had made with France and Britain and stay in the war against Germany. At the same time, soldiers and workers were electing their own councils in the big cities. These councils were called 'soviets', and at first they supported Kerensky.

Lenin.

Lenin was in Switzerland at this time. The Germans made a deal with him: they would give him a train to take him to Russia. They hoped that in return he would cause a revolution which would take Russia out of the war.

As soon as he arrived in Russia in April, Lenin declared his opposition to Kerensky. He said that the war was a war of capitalists and should be stopped. He said the real enemies of the Russian people were not the Germans, but the landowners and capitalists.

We call you to a revolution. We call on you not to die for others but to destroy others, to destroy your class enemies at home.

'Peace, Land and Bread'. Lenin.

Kerensky tried hard to keep up the spirits of the Russian army but failed. The German army was better equipped. Soon there were more defeats.

Food prices at home continued to rise. All Kerensky's promises seemed to be for the future. Lenin offered what the people wanted there and then. The Bolsheviks began to gain support among the workers' and soldiers' soviets. In July, the Bolsheviks tried to get control of the government but were defeated. Lenin had to leave the country wearing a wig to change his looks.

Then the Russian General Kornilov, who still supported the Tsar, turned his army against Kerensky. He wanted to remove Kerensky and bring the Tsar back to power. Kerensky was saved by the Bolsheviks: Bolshevik railway workers stopped Kornilov's advance, while Bolshevik soldiers and civilians formed armed Red Guard units. Kerensky's weakness became all too clear.

By October, Lenin was ready to act. Law and order in Russia had almost collapsed. In the countryside, peasants were seizing landowners' estates. In the army, Bolshevik ideas were spreading. Thousands of soldiers deserted and went home. In the cities, the armed Red Guard units were prepared to fight. Kerensky had lost the support of the people.

On the night of 24-25 October 1917, Red Guards stormed the Winter Palace where the members of the government were meeting. Kerensky was sent into exile and Lenin became ruler of Russia. This Bolshevik seizure of power was called the October Revolution.